

DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 320 182

CS 507 191

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TITLE Beliefs about Arguing as Predictors of Trait Argumentativeness.
PUB DATE Apr 90
NOTE 28p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Eastern Communication Association (81st, Philadelphia, PA, April 19-22, 1990).
PUB TYPE Speeches/Conference Papers (150) -- Reports - Research/Technical (143)
EDRS PRICE MF01/PC02 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Attitude Measures; *Beliefs; Communication Research; *Conflict; Higher Education; Multiple Regression Analysis; Persuasive Discourse; Questionnaires; Verbal Communication
IDENTIFIERS *Argumentativeness; Argument Research; Communication Behavior

ABSTRACT

A study examined how beliefs about arguing are related to the general motivation to argue. Subjects, 505 undergraduate students, were administered the Argumentativeness Scale and a beliefs-about-arguing measure. The scale contained 10 items for measuring the general tendency to approach arguments and 10 items for measuring the general tendency to avoid arguments. The beliefs-about-arguing measure consisted of 29 Likert-type items and was created by taking the 7 belief structures about arguing identified by Rancer, Baukus, and Infante (1985) and creating positive and negative items for each belief-structure category. Results indicated that six of the seven belief structures about arguing (hostility, skill, activity/process, self-image, control/dominance, conflict/dissonance) accounted for significant variance in trait argumentativeness. The hostility belief emerged as the best predictor of the trait. Results appear to validate the belief structures about arguing. (One figure and three tables of data are included. Forty references are attached.) (MG)

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**BELIEFS ABOUT ARGUING AS PREDICTORS OF
TRAIT ARGUMENTATIVENESS**

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Paper presented at the Eastern Communication Association
Convention, Philadelphia, PA, April 1990.

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Abstract

The predisposition of argumentativeness has received considerable attention from scholars in communication. Studies have explored the influence of argumentativeness in contexts such as interpersonal, family, organizational, political, small-group and intercultural.

Additional research is necessary to understand more fully why individuals vary in the trait predisposition. One approach to this goal is to examine beliefs individuals hold about argumentative communication. If beliefs underlie predispositions knowledge of beliefs about arguing should help explain variance in the trait. The purpose of the present study was to validate the belief structures about arguing. This study examined how beliefs about arguing are related to the general motivation to argue.

Five hundred five participants were administered the Argumentativeness Scale and a beliefs about arguing measure. A step-wise multiple regression revealed that six of the seven belief structures about arguing (hostility, activity/process, self-image, control/dominance, conflict/dissonance) accounted for significant variance in trait argumentativeness. The hostility belief emerged as the best predictor of the trait. The results appear to validate the belief structures about arguing. Implications of the findings for enhancing communication pedagogy in conflict management and interpersonal argumentation are offered.

BELIEFS ABOUT ARGUING AS PREDICTORS OF TRAIT ARGUMENTATIVENESS

Predispositions toward communication have been a central focus of theory-building efforts in communication for almost three decades. Predispositions have been found to account for significant variance in both communication behavior and communication-based perceptions (McCroskey & Daly, 1987; Infante, 1987).

The predisposition of argumentativeness has received considerable attention from scholars in communication. Rancer (1990) lists almost seventy journal articles, book chapters, conference papers, and dissertations on argumentativeness and related concepts disseminated since 1981. The plethora of research on this construct has included efforts designed to investigate the underlying factors associated with the development of this predisposition. This paper represents one such effort.

Argumentativeness is defined as a generally stable trait which predisposes individuals in communication situations to advocate positions on controversial issues, and to verbally challenge the positions that others hold on those issues (Infante & Rancer, 1982). Argumentativeness is conceptually and empirically distinct from verbal aggressiveness (Infante, 1988, Infante, 1987; Infante & Rancer, 1982; Infante & Wigley, 1986). In verbal aggression, the locus of the attack is on the individual instead of, or in addition to, their position on controversial issues.

Studies have emerged examining the influence of argumentativeness in several communication contexts. Research has explored argumentativeness in marital (Chandler-Sabourin, Infante, Rudd, & Payne, 1989; Infante, Chandler, & Rudd, 1989; Rancer, Baukus, & Amato, 1987, 1986), organizational (Infante & Gorden, 1989, 1987, 1985a, 1985b; Logue, 1987), political (Cryer Downs, Kaid, & Ragan, 1990) and small-group communication contexts (Barbato, 1987; Scheerhorn, 1987; Schultz, 1982). Studies have explored the relationship between argumentativeness and gender (Anderson, Schultz, & Courtney-Staley, 1987; Infante, 1985; Infante & Gorden, 1985a; Rancer & Baukus, 1987; Rancer & Dierks-Stewart, 1985) and leadership (Schultz, 1982). The relationship between argumentativeness and compliance-gaining behaviors has been studied (Boster & Levine, 1988; Boster, Levine & Kazoleas, 1989; Reynolds, 1987).

Argumentativeness has been associated with message processing in persuasion (Hample & Dallinger, 1987; Mongeau, 1989). Mongeau (1989) found that highly argumentative individuals exhibited significantly greater attitude-behavioral intention consistency. Highly argumentative individuals perceived low quality persuasive messages to be weaker than did less argumentative individuals.

Previous research (McCroskey & McCroskey, 1988) found that self-perceived communication competence is substantially associated with an individual's willingness to communicate and may be a significant factor in an individual's behavioral choices regarding communication. A significant relationship has been found between argumentativeness and self-perceptions of

communication competence (Richmond, McCroskey, & McCroskey, 1989). Richmond, McCroskey and McCroskey (1989) suggest that altering an individual's predispositional orientation toward communication (i.e., argumentativeness, communication apprehension, willingness to communicate) may be an effective prerequisite to communication pedagogy that only emphasizes skills training.

Along those lines, recent efforts have been proposed to enhance both an individual's motivation and skill in argumentative communication. Kosberg and Rancer (1989) reviewed several pedagogical methods which appear to result in enhanced motivation and skill in argumentative communication. Intensive, longitudinal skills training in arguing is not always possible whether conducted inside or outside of the traditional classroom. Programmatic approaches aimed at positively influencing an individual's cognitive or predispositional orientation to argumentative communication may be a valuable or preferred first course of action in enhancing one's communication competence. Data do not yet exist which compares the superiority of a behavioral, cognitive/predispositional, or mixed method approach to training in informal argument. Nevertheless, enhancing an individual's ability to argue constructively by influencing a person's motivation to argue (the cognitive and/or behavioral approach) or direct skills training in argumentation (the behavioral approach) is an expressed goal of communication education.

One line of inquiry in this body of research on argumentativeness has explored factors associated with individuals who vary in motivation to argue (Infante, 1982; Rancer, Baukus & Infante, 1985; Rancer & Infante, 1985). In order to better understand the trait, Rancer, Baukus and Infante (1985) suggested that the Fishbein and Ajzen (1975) framework was appropriate for further research to ascertain why individuals may vary in the trait.

In Fishbein and Ajzen's theory of reasoned action, human behavior is directly linked to attitudes and beliefs. They maintain further that a predisposition is controlled by the set of beliefs which the individual has learned to associate with the object of predisposition. Thus, a profitable direction for gaining understanding of argumentativeness was to determine the belief structures which people have about arguing. It was reasoned that if beliefs control predispositions, knowledge of why individuals vary in motivational tendency to argue may be achieved by determining the belief structures which are associated with the predisposition to argue.

Utilizing the theoretical framework developed by Fishbein and Ajzen (1975), Rancer, Baukus and Infante (1985) identified several underlying belief structures associated with argumentative communication. In their study, participants were asked to elicit beliefs they have about arguing and argumentative communication. Content analytic procedures were used to classify the beliefs into a set of categories identified as beliefs about arguing. Eight belief structures emerged: hostility, activity/process, control/dominance, conflict/dissonance, self-

image, learning, skill, and situational. Seven of the belief structures have a positive and negative valence. With the exception of the situational belief category, individuals can express a positive or negative belief about arguing under belief structure.

Hostility represents the belief that arguing is an aggressive, combative communication act. Activity/process is representative of affective responses to arguing as an activity. It represents the belief that arguing is a mode of social interaction. Control/dominance represents beliefs about arguing as a mechanism for controlling and/or dominating another person. Conflict/dissonance concerns beliefs about arguing as a communication act in which social conflict or dissonance is the most salient characteristic. Argumentative communication's impact on an individual's and their adversary's self-concept constitute the self-image belief structure. Beliefs about arguing as a communication event where information acquisition and dissemination are the most salient characteristics constitute the learning belief. Beliefs concerning arguing as a communication event where the presence (or absence) of verbal and rhetorical ability is most salient constitute the skill belief structure. Situational beliefs were concerned with arguing as an event which is overtly influenced by contextual factors. Various situational factors such as aspects of the adversary (sex, status, relational considerations), the environment (time, location, setting), and the topic of the argument (saliency, ego-involvement, relevance) emerged in that belief structure

category.

Individuals who vary in ARGgt were also found to differ in the valence of their belief about arguing. In testing the belief structures about arguing, Rancer, Baukus and Infante (1985) found that high argumentatives have predominantly positive beliefs about arguing, while low argumentatives have predominantly negative beliefs about arguing.

It appears worthwhile to examine further how beliefs about arguing are related to individuals motivation to argue. The identification of which belief structures about arguing are most related to the general trait to be argumentative may be useful in attempting to alter an individual's communication predisposition, and consequently their communication behavior. For example, negative beliefs about arguing as a disruptive, hostile or combative communication activity (the hostility belief structure) may significantly dampen an individual's motivation to argue and hence performance in social conflict situations.

Recent research has explored the relationship between lack of skill in arguing and interspousal violence (Chandler Sabourin, Infante, Rudd, & Payne, 1989; Infante, Chandler & Rudd, 1989). Findings conclude that husbands and wives involved in violent marriages were lower in argumentativeness (and higher in verbal aggression) when compared to husbands and wives in self-reported nonviolent relationships. One implication of this finding is that couples experiencing interspousal violence are less motivated to argue controversial issues, and engage in social conflict encounters much less constructively.

The seminal study by Rancer, Baukus and Infante (1985) identified the seven belief structures through content analytic procedures. If beliefs control predispositions, then an increased understanding of how the belief structures about arguing are associated with ARGgt appears warranted. If a significant percentage of variance in the trait is accounted for by the seven beliefs structures, this finding should constitute validation of the beliefs identified in earlier research.

An understanding of the relative potency of each belief in accounting for variance in ARGgt would also have utility. Which of the seven belief structures about arguing is the best predictor of the trait? Which of the seven beliefs, if any, adds little to our understanding of the general trait?

The purpose of the present study was to validate the belief structures about arguing identified by Rancer, Baukus and Infante (1985) by examining the relationship between the belief structures about arguing and the general trait to be argumentative (ARGgt). Specifically this study sought to: (1) determine the percentage of variance in the general trait to be argumentative (ARGgt) which is explained by the belief structures; and (2) examine the relative potency of each belief as they account for variance in the general trait to be argumentative.

METHOD

Participants

Research participants were 505 undergraduate students (255 males, 250 females) who were enrolled in introductory courses in

communication at a large eastern university. The participants ranged in age from 17-34 years old with a mean age of 20.6. Participation was voluntary. Traditional undergraduate students were studied because earlier research from which the belief structures emerged was conducted on the same population.

Procedures

A four-page questionnaire was administered to the participants. The first page of the questionnaire contained general instructions about the nature of the study and requested general demographic information such as age, sex, and class. A second page contained the Argumentativeness Scale (Infante & Rancer, 1982). The scale contains ten items for measuring the general tendency to approach arguments (ARGap) and ten items for measuring general tendency to avoid arguments (ARGav). Considerable evidence supports the reliability and validity of the scale (Infante & Rancer, 1982; Infante, 1981; Rancer, Baukus & Infante, 1985; Boster & Levine, 1988; Richmond, McCroskey, & McCroskey, 1989).

The third and fourth pages of the questionnaire consisted of twenty-nine Likert-type items designed to measure beliefs about arguing. This measure was created by taking the seven belief structures identified by Rancer, Baukus and Infante (1985) and creating positive and negative items for each belief structure category. An example of a positive item from the hostility belief structure category was "I enjoy a good verbal fight." An example of a negative item from the hostility belief structure category was "Arguing usually leads to anger and unreasonable

behavior."

Four items were created for the hostility and activity/process belief structure categories, three items were created for the control/dominance, self-image, and learning belief structure categories, five items were created for the conflict/dissonance belief structure category, and two items were developed for the skill belief structure (see Figure 1).

In addition to these twenty-four items, five additional Likert-type items were created to measure situational perceptions which have been suggested to influence argumentative behavior (Gorden & Infante, 1987; Infante & Gorden, 1989; Onyekwere, Rubin, & Infante, 1987). Three of the items were associated with the individual's potential adversary in an argument (higher authority others, spouses/intimates, dates). One item examined the influence of ego-involvement with the topic of an argument). The fifth item examined the influence of context (e.g., at work).

RESULTS

Descriptive statistics and internal reliability estimates for the two dimensions of argumentativeness (ARGap and ARGav), and the seven belief structure dimensions are reported in Table 1.

Table 1 about here

The reliability coefficients obtained for the two dimensions of the argumentativeness scale in this study were similar to those reported in previous research (Infante & Rancer, 1982). Coefficient alphas for the seven belief structures about arguing ranged from .70 to .33. Reliability coefficients of six of the seven belief structures (hostility, activity/process, control/dominance, self-image, learning and skill) were most likely attenuated by the low number of items for each belief structure.

In order to examine the relationship between the predictor variables (the seven belief structures about arguing) and the criterion variable (general trait argumentativeness), a step-wise multiple regression was conducted. This procedure permits us to examine the relative contribution of each belief structure to the prediction of the general trait as well as reveals the total percentage of variance in the trait accounted for by the belief structures. Table 2 reports the results of the step-wise multiple regression.

Table 2 about here

The results revealed that six of the seven belief structures about arguing accounted for significant variance in the criterion variable of trait argumentativeness. In addition, the situational belief concerning arguing with those of higher authority also emerged as a significant predictor of the general trait to be argumentative.

✓
Indeed, the six belief structure dimensions plus belief25 (arguing with higher authority others) accounted for almost sixty percent of the total variance in an individual's general trait to be argumentative. The belief (positive or negative) about arguing as a combative and aggressive communication act (hostility) emerged as the strongest predictor, accounting for thirty-seven percent of the variance in ARGgt.

The only belief structure that did not add significantly to the variance in the criterion variable was learning. However, this belief structure was significantly correlated with ARGgt. Table 3 reports the correlations of the belief structures about arguing with the general trait measure.

Table 3 about here

DISCUSSION

The results of this study appear to offer strong support regarding the validity of the belief structures about arguing identified by earlier research (Rancer, Baukus, & Infante, 1985). Six of the beliefs structures were identified as significant predictors of trait argumentativeness. Approximately sixty percentage of the total variance in the trait predisposition (ARGgt) was accounted for by six of the belief structures (hostility, skill, activity/process, self-image, control/dominance, conflict/dissonance), and the situational

belief about arguing with higher authority others.

While learning did not emerge as a significant predictor of ARGgt in the multiple regression model, it was correlated with ARGgt. Learning about oneself, topics under controversy, and one's adversary is consistently used as justification in interpersonal communication texts for changing beliefs about arguing and for improving one's skill in managing conflict productively (Infante, 1988). The inconsistency between the data obtained and conventional wisdom warrants further investigation.

Greater attention to the measurement of the belief structures about arguing should be pursued. Coefficient alpha's for the seven belief structures obtained were more modest than anticipated. Reliability coefficients of the belief structures was most likely attenuated by the length of each subscale or belief structure category. Perhaps greater attention to item wording would enhance the current measurement of beliefs about arguing.

In applying the results of this study, it would be productive to focus on altering negative beliefs about arguing as a hostile, aggressive, and combative communication activity. Communication scholars suggest that such beliefs are counterproductive to successful efforts at conflict management (Infante, 1988; Rancer, Baukus & Infante, 1985). For example, discussions of negative beliefs about arguing as expressions of hostility may be introduced in family mediation and marital counseling sessions. Positive beliefs about arguing as a productive form of conflict management could be highlighted in training couples who suffer from destructive forms of conflict

behavior because of their beliefs that arguing is a hostile activity. According to the Fishbein and Ajzen (1975) framework, this effort at altering the individual's beliefs about arguing should do much to influence their general predisposition to argue. Enhancing motivation to argue, coupled with skills training, should result in enhanced argumentative behavior.

The efficacy of these methods has been examined by communication scholars. Schultz and Anderson (1984) and Anderson, Schultz and Staley (1987) have incorporated the argumentativeness construct in their efforts in training in conflict management. They state, "Exposing subjects to information that expands and alters their perceptions about argumentativeness and conflict in positive directions will influence them to change their attitudes in positive directions" (Anderson, Schultz, & Staley, 1987, p. 64).

Training methods could include examination of specific beliefs that individuals hold about arguing. This would enhance our understanding of individual communication styles and how these styles interact in different types of relationships (e.g., husband-wife, parent-child, superior-subordinate, doctor-patient). Sillars and Ganer (1982) suggest "beliefs can be found in actual communication messages, or can be inferred directly from them" (p. 185). For example, a husband may hold the belief that arguing reduces conflict, (conflict/dissonance) and is an enjoyable activity (activity/process). The wife, however, may hold the belief that arguing causes her to feel dominated by her spouse (control/dominance), and usually makes matters worse

(conflict/ dissonance). Knowledge of this belief discrepancy may be a first step to helping the dyad ameliorate the potential destructive conflict cycle found in their interpersonal relationship.

In developing communication training methods designed to encourage productive argumentation the belief structures that best predict the trait should be highlighted. Cognitive training programs designed to teach productive ways to manage conflict should focus on the beliefs which emerged as significant predictors of trait argumentativeness. A greater understanding of the beliefs about arguing which underlie the trait offers opportunities for enhancing or changing the argumentative behavior of individuals.

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Figure 1

Beliefs About Arguing Measure

Directions:

Listed below are several statements regarding beliefs about arguing and argumentative communication. We are interested in understanding YOUR beliefs about arguing. Please indicate the extent of your agreement with each of these statements by placing the appropriate number in the blank to the left of the statement. Use the following scale:

5=Strongly Agree

4=Agree

3=Neutral (undecided, cannot say)

2=Disagree

1=Strongly Disagree

There are no right or wrong responses to these statements.

- _____ 1. I enjoy a good verbal fight. (Hostility)*
- _____ 2. Arguing gives me insight into how others see the world. (Learning)
- _____ 3. Arguing increases my communication ability. (Skill)
- _____ 4. Arguing is a waste of time. (Activity/Process)*
- _____ 5. Arguing is a type of education. (Learning)
- _____ 6. When I do well in an argument, I experience a sense of power. (Control/Dominance)
- _____ 7. When I argue with someone, issues usually are not discussed fully enough. (Learning)*
- _____ 8. Arguing creates tension between people. (Conflict/Dissonance)*
- _____ 9. Arguing is fun. (Activity/Process)
- _____ 10. People will dislike me if I argue with them. (Self-Image)*
- _____ 11. I find it difficult to state my case well when I argue. (Skill)*
- _____ 12. Matters usually become worse between people when they argue with each other. (Conflict/Dissonance)*
- _____ 13. Arguing is an effective means of resolving differences between people. (Conflict/Dissonance)
- _____ 14. Arguing usually leads to anger and unreasonable behavior. (Hostility)

Figure 1, continued

- _____15. Arguing is a type of inexpensive, enjoyable entertainment. (Activity/Process)
 - _____16. Unless an argument actually resolves an issue, it is not enjoyable. (Activity/Process)*
 - _____17. Arguing provides an opportunity to persuade someone over to my side of an issue. (Control/Dominance)
 - _____18. Arguing reduces aggression. (Conflict/Dissonance)
 - _____19. I rarely try to change others opinions. (Control/Dominance)*
 - _____20. Arguments can be vicious. (Hostility)
 - _____21. It feels good, during an argument, to let out my feelings and support and defend my ideas. (Self-Image)
 - _____22. When I argue, I don't feel good about myself. (Self-Image)*
 - _____23. Arguing helps resolve conflict. (Conflict/Dissonance)
 - _____24. Arguing is a hostile means of resolving differences between people. (Hostility)
 - _____25. I do not argue with people in positions of higher authority.
 - _____26. I will only argue if the topic is important to me.
 - _____27. I do not enjoy arguing with my spouse/lover.
 - _____28. I will argue frequently when I am at work.
 - _____29. Arguing while on a date can ruin a relationship.
-

*Items 1,4,7,8,10,11,12,16,19,22 get reversed polarity.
(3=1) (4=2) (2=4) (1=5)

Table 1
Descriptive Statistics and Reliabilities of Measures

<u>Scale</u>	<u># of items</u>	<u>Mean</u>	<u>S.D.</u>	<u>Coefficient Alpha</u>
<u>Argumentativeness</u>				
ARGap	10	33.23	6.71	.87
ARGav	10	28.00	6.65	.84
<u>Belief Structures About Arguing</u>				
Hostility	4	13.12	2.51	.58
Activity/Process	4	11.40	2.88	.61
Control/Dominance	3	10.77	1.99	.55
Conflict/Dissonance	5	15.08	3.23	.70
Self-Image	3	11.26	1.75	.54
Learning	3	10.34	1.92	.51
Skill	2	7.07	1.53	.33

Table 2
Results of Step-Wise Regression Analysis

Criterion Variable: ARGgt

Predictors

<u>Belief Structure/Item</u>	<u>Multiple R</u>	<u>R²</u>	<u>F</u>
Hostility	.606	.37	285.03*
Skill	.705	.50	241.83*
Activity/Process	.740	.55	197.59*
Self-Image	.757	.57	163.64*
Control/Dominance	.763	.58	135.47*
Conflict/Dissonance	.767	.59	115.53*
Belief 25 (Arguing w/authority)	.770	.59	100.57*

*p < .01

Table 3
Correlations of Belief Structures About Arguing
With ARGgt

	<u>Hostile</u>	<u>ActPro</u>	<u>ConDo</u>	<u>ConDiss</u>	<u>SImage</u>	<u>Learn</u>	<u>Skill</u>
ARGgt	-.60*	.59*	.42*	.40*	.53*	.47*	.60*

* $p < .01$